

## St Mary's Concord

### A Reflection for Feast of the Most Holy Trinity

*Each year as we return to the Ordinary Sundays, the first Sunday after Pentecost is celebrated as the feast of the Most Holy Trinity. Devotion to the Trinity emerged in the fourth and fifth centuries in response to various theological controversies and particularly after the spread of Arianism. The feast was introduced into the Church's calendar in 1334 by Pope John XXII.*

*The readings for Trinity Sunday (Year A): Exodus 34:4-6, 8-9; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; John 3:16-18.*

*To contain the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic health restrictions remain in place. Although churches may now open for 50 people, Sunday Masses will not resume at St Mary's Concord until July 2020.*



***The Holy Trinity***

by Hendrick van Balen (1575-1632) a Flemish artist from the 17th century.

Oil on panel, dated 1620, Sint-Jacobskerk, Antwerp

Throughout the centuries our religious imagination has been formed by artists. Many artists of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, when painting scenes that included the Trinity, depicted God the Father as an



old man with a long white beard. Jesus was depicted as the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit was usually depicted as a dove hovering above them.

The artists themselves were influenced by biblical images, particularly the scene of the Baptism of Jesus where the Holy Spirit was described as a dove (Mt 3:16). Typically, the artists show God the Son as the Risen Jesus and imagine him as a man in his thirties. Since Jesus had called God his father, it therefore made sense that the first person of the Trinity should be shown as an older man.

As human beings we look for concrete images to help us to understand the very nature of God. Even the language we use to express our faith is limited by our human experience. Therefore, it is not surprising that we talk about God in human terms. In fact, we often attribute to God human feelings and emotions.

Human reason can attempt to find arguments for the existence of God but human knowledge cannot discover the nature of God. We understand that we can only know God because God has chosen to intervene in human history. We call that intervention God's revelation.

The People of Israel had a clear sense of the transcendence, the otherness of God. While they rejected any attempt to make a concrete image of God, they believed that God did communicate with them through human intermediaries such as Moses and the prophets (see Exodus 34:8-9).

The authors of the Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament), reflecting on their experience, used metaphors drawn from their human relationships to describe the nature of God. Thus, God is like a king who rules his people with mercy and compassion; God is also described as a shepherd and as the bridegroom. In doing so they also attributed to God human feelings and emotions: "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6).

As Christians we believe that God's ultimate intervention into human history happened when God took on our human nature and was born in time. We believe that the man Jesus was "God-with-us", the name given to him in Matthew's gospel before his birth (Mt 1:23).

The early followers of Jesus also struggled to find words to describe their experience of God's presence in their relationship with Jesus. When Jesus called God his Father, the language of human relationships gave the disciples a way to express their experience. In Jesus, they were encountering God among them and if the God of Abraham is the Father of Jesus, then Jesus is the Son of God.

By the time John's gospel came to be written that insight became more clearly expressed and we are told that God sent his son into the world so that the world may be saved through him (Jn 3:17).

Over the past two Sundays, as we have celebrated the Ascension and Pentecost, we have seen how the early disciples experienced God's presence in a new way after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The risen Jesus was no longer physically present as he had been, but they continued to experience "God-with-us" through the gift of the Spirit.

Each year as we celebrate this Sunday after Pentecost, we are being given an opportunity to look back over the Easter season and to recall the unity of the Easter event. That is the insight offered by John's Gospel: the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus have created a new relationship with God. We share in that relationship through the gift of the Holy Spirit that allows us to become one with God through Christ our Lord.



We will always struggle to find adequate words to express our relationship with God because our language is always coloured by our human experience. For some, to describe God as “Father and Son” is to attribute to God a human relationship that is not their experience of God. For others, the word “father” carries too many negative connotations to ever express their relationship with God.

Even as we continue to use the language of “Father, Son and Spirit” to express our collective experience of God’s revelation, we also need to recall that the Sacred Scriptures offer us a much richer vocabulary.

If our religious imagination is in fact formed by the insights of artists, then an internet search for “The Trinity in art” may be an appropriate next step on our journey of encounter with the living God.

*Paul Crowley*  
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